

Fleeting Life and Courage

by Rishall

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Summary: -Like leaves in the winter, the sound of swords clashing and the art of battle has long since faded away. It is replaced with guns and acts of mindless violence that hold honor and sensibility hostage.- A really quick one shot about Souji, Kondou, and Hijikata in one of their last battles. It's more based on history than the anime/game, but the history isn't all correct.-*Edited*

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Like leaves in the winter, the sound of swords clashing and the art of battle has long since faded away. It is replaced with guns and acts of mindless violence that hold honor and sensibility hostage.

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><p>Okita Souji<p>

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The night is cold and the men are starving. Snow falls onto the ground, illuminated by the moon's radiance. In the midst of all this suffering, the world goes on. As comrade and enemy's blood alike paints the white ground red, beauty is still beauty. But more importantly, war persists as war. In our hearts, all of us warriors have accepted our fate. We can defeat our opponents, or die with honor in the process.

I try to hold my katana. The effort is fruitless. _Why? _

I used to be one of the most skilled swordsmen among the Shinsengumi, second only to Saito and Hijikata. I used to fight with my entire

soul; my daisho were my limbs and the banner of sincerity my heart. Once, before my body began to die against my will, I was so alive. So _why_? How can something as mundane as sickness steal it all away from me? How can...?

_"Souji," the voice of my commander echoes from outside the thin tent shelter, "are you doing alright?"

"Of course, I should be fighting again tomorrow morning," I lie in the strongest voice I can muster. It isn't very convincing, even to my ears. Commander Kondou-san audibly sighs and informs me that I should try and rest as much as possible. I don't want to obey the demands. If I rest any longer, I fear I'll never get up.

I'm able to hold in the cough long enough to hear the foot steps fade. My whole body shakes violently and spasms. I hold my arm to my face, hand over my lips, trying to muffle the sound. The fit ends. Tentatively, almost as if afraid to know the truth, I draw my bony, cupped hand from my mouth. Dread tightens in my chest at the result. A mixture of blood and saliva drips onto the dirt floor.

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><p>Isami Kondou<p>

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I walk among the men as they laugh and tell stories despite the tragedy of our situation. It's hard to imagine they've stayed by my side all this time. Even after I've strayed from the path and led many to the grave, their warrior spirit and loyalty remains as strong as it was before the war started. The Shinsengumi started off as a band of lion-hearted young men that numbered only thirteen. Now, the head count has swelled into the hundreds. Am I really capable of holding the lives of so many?

"How's he doing?" Asks a soft voice from the shadows. I turn to see Toshi.

"He says he's fine as always, but it's getting worse. I'm starting to think that our physician Matsumoto was right and it's not just a cold."

"So you believe Souji has Tuberculosis?" He says the word so easily.

My words are clearly laced with worry as I reply, "He hasn't been eating for days now and when he wakes, his hair is drenched in sweat. Like always, he's trying his best to hide it and pretend it's nothing, but it's not. I think he may even be coughing up blood."

Hijikata nods, "How long do you believe he has left?"

"I don't know."

"Look, try not to worry. The men need their commander, if we are to emerge victorious. Tomorrow, we may be facing our toughest challenge yet and need you to be strong in both body and mind. I'll try to get someone to care for Souji. Please commander, don't let one man's

illness infect our chance of victory."

His words, harsh as they are, tell nothing but the simple truth. And yet, the thought of Souji, the boy I trained and brought into the Shinsengumi, withering away kills me from within.

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><p>Toshizo Hijikata<p>

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Looking back, lots of things changed over the course of the next few days. The Battle of Toba-Fushimi, as it is now called, opened our eyes more than anything. Old ways and new technology clashed together and we learned that guts and katana alone weren't enough to overcome the sheer force of guns.

The day began with a march along the main road to the capital Kyoto. We Shinsengumi, along with other members of the Tokugawa Shogunate and Aizu Domains, eventually encountered the enemy Satsuma-Choshu Army along the way. Our army outnumbered theirs three to one, but while we had our swords and spears, they had guns and cannons.

We did our best to hold them off, showing no fear as they cut our army apart with ease. Even as the slaughter continued, Kondou refused to retreat. To this day I have no idea whether I find it heroic or just foolhardy. The sound of bullets firing, drowned out any noise of steel against steel. In the end, though the endeavor was valiant, we suffered a great loss, not only of a battle, but many brave samurai.

After the Battle of Toba-Fushimi, Kondou was forced to flee to Edo, along with some of the remaining men of the Shinsengumi, including Souji; who was being transferred from Physician Matsumoto's hospital. Shortly after, a few battles occurred against the Imperial Court including the Battle of Koshu-Katsunuma where Kondou was captured. He was beheaded before we could lift a finger. When I returned to Edo, with a heavy heart and the burden of being appointed the new commander of the Shinsengumi, yet another weight was added to my shoulders: Souji had succumb to his Tuberculosis.

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I stand in the light of the moon. The men we have left are still loyal as ever. This war has taken so many lives, and for what? What was it all for? A soft breeze blows and I exhale with it. This war isn't over. There is at least one more battle to wage, but everyone knows the outcome.

"So, are you going to surrender?" Matsumoto's calm voice drifts through the wind, "I'm afraid that this last battle is one that you cannot win, no matter how much strength and courage you possess."

With a dark smile and a bit of final resolve setting rest to my conflicting emotions, I reply, "I am not going to battle to win. With the Tokugawa government about to collapse, it would be a disgrace if no one is willing to go down with it. That is why I must go. I will

fight the best battle of my life to die for the country."

As a sakura blossom falls to the ground, Matsumoto simply nods.

End
file.